

Whitefish Stakeholder Engagement Zoom Meeting
March 11, 2021

The presentation was recorded and will be available on DNR website.

<https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Fishing/lakemichigan/LakeMichiganCommercialWhitefish.html>

Notes from Question/Comment session [Responses in brackets.]

- Charlie – Some commercial fishers will struggle with EFHRS. We believe we can do the study without it. The Lake Michigan Commercial Fishing Board has not discussed a limit on the feet of gill net that can be fished. It is important to note that in general, gill net use is declining, and fishers often do day sets to minimize and avoid bycatch. We don't want bycatch. There is ongoing discussion about closed fishing areas, and we are committed to avoiding user conflict.
- George – The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation represents many sport anglers. These regulations must be data driven. Studies must be completed, and the data must be analyzed. The bycatch must be minimized. If there is a differentiation in gill net day sets vs overnight sets, that should be taken into consideration if we have the data to support it. Avoiding user conflict is important. Gear, location, or temporal restrictions could all be considered. It is surprising that electronic reporting is still an issue. All of us need to learn to use technology; two years ago none of us could use Zoom technology. DNR staff are getting paid out of funds from sportsmen, not just from Great Lakes fishers.
- Bob – There is a lot of money being taken out of the general license fund for hunting and fishing to pay for commercial monitoring. It is time to bring this up to the NRB again. However, commercial fishers should not be solely responsible for the cost. Sport anglers need to be reassured that increases in commercial fishing are not going to impact recreational fishing – if the whitefish population crashes in a few years, sport anglers should not take a cut in the whitefish bag limit. The cut should be shared equally between commercial and sport. Maybe a sunset clause should be included to allow an opportunity to re-evaluate.
 - [Brad – the proposals in the emergency rule are only good for the 2021 season. The permanent rule process is separate, but a sunset could be included there.]
- Keith – Why is this an emergency? We don't have the data to support it at this point. I'm concerned by not only continuing gill netting, but also expanding it. We need incidental catch data before moving forward.
- Jnmdr – Are the quotas being met now? Are they being met in such a hurry that fishing is shut down? Is there a market for additional whitefish? If this is a study, when are we going to see the data from the study? Will it be made available to the public in a timely manner?
 - [Brad – We have had presentations on the data collected so far. Taylor has presented her bycatch and harvest information, and Titus has also presented on previous monitoring. We will use Taylor's information to help guide us moving forward with the permanent rule. In Zone 1, commercial fishers get close to catching their quota. The additional poundage would allow more fish to be caught there and give flexibility to the fishers.]

- [Charlie – The commercials have produced a large amount of data. We’ve been working on this for 7 years, including proposing a study, fish tagging, partnering with UWGB and Sea Grant. This has not been rushed. We are asking for a modest increase from a healthy population of fish. There is a market available. Why would we catch fish that we can’t sell? If we freeze fish, that is only because someone wants to buy them frozen. We sell fish all over the world, but the biggest driver of the market is in northeast WI. We supply to non-sportsmen, restaurants, fish markets, etc. We are businesspeople, just like guides and charter captains. We have a vested interest in the sustainability of this resource. We are trying to work with everyone, just like we have always done. The modest increase in the emergency rule will help us with the study. The question of funding commercial using sport dollars has been around for a long time. I would support a legislative change in funding. Education and avoiding user conflict are important. We typically fish deeper water in Green Bay than sport anglers, which helps avoid gear conflict. We agree that this decision needs to be data driven, and we are helping with that.]
- Jnmdr – Maybe I misheard, but during a guide meeting it was noted that the whitefish population was going down, but here you are saying the population is not declining. Which is correct?
 - [Brad – We are very confident in our modeling that allows for 1.176 million pounds per sport and commercial fisheries for a total proposed quota of 2.35 million in Green Bay.]
- Keith – I worked on the commercial boats in the 1980s and sport fished my whole life. Whitefish averaged 5-6 lbs. years ago, and now they are 2 lbs. and 18-21 inches. It seems as though we have a stunted population. An increase in the quota may help the population. The whitefish are now meat eaters. They target gobies and small perch in shallow water, which they never used to do. They could be impacting the populations of other fish species as well. Based on my experience, I think the commercial bycatch is a non-issue.
- Bob – I agree with Keith and Charlie. It is a complicated issue. Whitefish are changing their eating habits. Not only are they eating fish, but University of Michigan and Michigan State studies have shown that whitefish are eating large numbers of quagga mussels. I want to make sure we have all the right data. Commercial fishers have one of the hardest jobs. Charter captains and guides are out fishing and harvesting 2-5 fish/person. There are a lot of people who benefit from charters and guides, just like people benefit from commercial fishing. We need to work together and need to make sure we have the data right before making a commitment.
- Keith – I’m not sure that whitefish are targeting mussels as much as they are eating them incidentally because they are rooting through the mussels looking for gobies. The mussels don’t have much nutritional value.
- Jnmdr – I’m not against commercial fishers making a living, but I’m trying to figure out the information including economics. Is there no gill net length restriction right now? How would gill nets be marked? Perhaps DNR should publish the gill net marking rules.
 - [Bob – There is a limit on gill net with mesh 4 inches or larger where only 12,000 feet can be fished at any one time per license.]
 - [Brad – There are also restrictions on areas, depths, mesh size, etc. There are net marking standards that will continue to be followed. We have educational information

on trap net marking requirements on our website, and we can expand that to include gill nets. <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/Fishing/greatlakes/trapnets.html>]

- [Bob – Markings are different for gill nets vs trap nets. Trap nets are marked significantly more than gill nets, but they generally take up a larger area than gill nets. There are many flags and buoys marking the trap net. Gill nets are required to have a buoy on each end of the net with a staff and flag.]
- [Charlie – Trap nets are heavily anchored compared to gill nets. If fishing equipment gets entangled in a gill net, the gill net would move whereas a trap net will not.]
- [Titus – Sea Grant’s website has a guide to identifying trap net flags and buoys. Whitefish are a benthic species and their historical diet was made up of Diporeia, a small amphipod. Now that the Diporeia have declined, mussels, midge larvae, etc. are found in whitefish diets now. Many different foods are eaten by whitefish at varying times of the year.]
- Charlie – A grad student did an extensive diet study from fish in the Bay. Some fish caught in the same net had vastly different stomach contents. Walleye, bass, and whitefish have all thrived with the gill net fishery in the Bay. The guides do not have restrictions like commercial fishers do. They are not limited in how many shacks they can put out on the ice.
- Keith – Trap nets weren’t marked well when I was a kid; they are marked very well now. Sometimes gill nets don’t seem to be marked as well.
 - [Brad – If you see a net that does not meet the marking requirements, report it.]
 - [Charlie – We helped develop the current standards for trap nets, which demonstrates our commitment to avoiding user conflict.]
- Jnmdr – Is the emergency rule document written already? Will there be an opportunity to provide additional input if drastic changes are made after tonight’s meeting?
 - [Brad – The rule is still under development. If it is a matter of minor tweaks to our proposal from what was presented tonight, we would likely not have another public meeting.]
- Keith – I would like to see the emergency rule in writing before it goes to the Natural Resources Board.
 - [Brad – I will check into it and let you know if we can do that.]
 - [Charlie – When the NRB agenda is published, usually the rule document is attached. Anyone can see it at that point, and it becomes a NRB decision. We intend to finalize the catch composition study plan with UWGB and Sea Grant soon and will begin monitoring. We know that over time there will be change; if the quota is looked at every three years, the quotas can be adjusted accordingly.]
 - [Brad – the public can make comments to the NRB regarding the rule proposal.]

Participants (28 during the presentation, including DNR and staff from other agencies/universities)

WDNR

Brad Eggold
Al Blizel
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Laura Schmidt
Meredith Penthorn
Mike Donofrio
Bob Stroess
Scott Hansen
Tom Meronek
Cheryl Masterson

Other Agencies/Universities

Titus Seilheimer – UW Sea Grant
Susan Wells – US Fish & Wildlife Service
Taylor Hrabak – UW-Green Bay

Participants

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